



Brand orientation, employer branding and internal branding: Do they effect on recruitment during the COVID-19 pandemic?

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ABSTRACT

Over the last twenty-five years, employer branding has been a subject of increasing attention among HRM scholars and practitioners. However, very limited research has explored the link between employer branding and HRM performance. To address the gap, in this study we explored how employer branding orientation impacted recruitment outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition we combined both the brand orientation and internal branding concepts to better empirically explain their impact on building employer brand orientation. Based on cross-sectional data collected from 233 companies operating on Russian labor market, we found the positive relationships between brand orientation and employer branding orientation, between employer branding orientation and the employer branding programs, which are positively related to recruitment outcomes. However, the moderating effect of internal branding was negative. We also found moderating effects of COVID-19 in the relationship between employer branding orientation, employer branding programs, and recruitment outcomes.

1. Introduction

Employer branding is dynamically developing as a field of multi-disciplinary studies over the last twenty-five years. Academic scholars have recognized employer branding as a key resource for attracting high-quality employees in the war for talent (Elving, Westhoff, Meeusen, & Schoonderbeek, 2013). However, only one study has examined yet whether employer branding orientation impacted recruitment efficiency and firm performance (Tumasjan, Kunze, Bruch, & Welpe, 2020). The dominating perspective (i.e., the external perspective) refers to the role of the external employer brand image in forming the individual positive impressions of applicants toward the company and their subsequent intentions to apply there, participate in selection process, and to accept a job offer (De Stobbeleir et al., 2018). This perspective includes such heterogeneous theoretical approaches as social identity (Turner, 1975), organizational identity (He & Brown, 2013), person-organization fit (Astakhova, 2016) and signaling (Spence, 1973) theories but does not explain the impact of employer branding on organizational outcomes, including HRM performance. Thus, there is a lack of firm-level research on employer branding.

The COVID-19 pandemic started in 2020 as a natural disaster and

later caused an immense worldwide economic crisis with significant losses of employment, work hours, and labor income (ILO Monitor, 2021). Meanwhile, the resent global study indicates that, among more than 42,000 employers in 43 counties, 24 countries strengthened their hiring intentions in the second quarter of 2021 (ManpowerGroup, 2021). This trend seems to be optimistic regarding new employer branding and recruitment programs, hence the role of HRM increases and the pandemic represents a good context for its investigation.

This study integrates the potential of three concepts: brand orientation, internal branding and employer branding orientation. These three interconnected perspectives represent the organizational views on branding as a key source of long-term competitive advantages. The previous conceptual debates argue that brand orientation acts as a guide for both employer and internal branding and aligning three concepts should lead to an increase in organizational performance and a strengthened corporate brand (Foster, Punjaisri, & Cheng, 2010). Both internal and employer branding aim at communicating brand promises and are seen as value-based approaches (Mosley, 2007). There are several systematic literature reviews where the scholars provide with conceptual frameworks on synergy between corporate branding, brand orientation, internal branding and employer branding. For example,

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Foster et al. (2010) proposed the model of the relationship between internal, employer and corporate branding. They state that both internal and employer branding are inter-related parts of corporate branding that covers “promise management”. Internal branding is focused on current employees whereas employer branding is focused on potential employees. A more specific model was provided by Barros-Arrieta and García-Cali (2020). Here an effort of conceptualization of internal branding is given. The model consists of several antecedents (brand orientation, internal market orientation) that facilitate the implementation of internal branding. Internal branding, in turn, is composed of brand-centred human resource management practices, internal branding communications and brand leadership. Internal branding leads to such outcomes as brand understanding, identification, commitment, loyalty and citizenship behaviors. These scholars also tend to explain the differences between employer and internal branding by the particular stakeholder groups (potential vs current employees) but do not clearly indicate the role of employer branding in their model. In this study, we also follow the idea on synergy between brand orientation, internal and employer branding.

However, despite the studies mentioned above, the literature witnesses several gaps. First, there is still lack of empirical confirmation of the relationship between brand orientation, internal branding and employer branding. In some studies, internal branding is seen as an antecedent of employer branding (Hoppe, 2018). In other studies, there is an attempt to combine brand orientation with internal branding. Based on the extensive literature review Piha and Avlonitis (2018) provide with a construct of ‘internal branding orientation’ that is described as “the extent to which a company is committed to generating the desired brand internalisation across the organisation and motivating towards the alignment of staff behaviour with brand values” (Piha & Avlonitis, 2018, p. 379). Second, there is a very limited number of studies that empirically confirm an impact of employer branding on firm-level outcomes. Although the scholars are quite optimistic in explaining the role of employer branding in increasing recruitment outcomes and productivity (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004) and even financial market performance and shareholder value (Theurer, Tumasjan, Welp, & Lievens, 2018), the empirical evidence is rather scarce. In this study, our major focus is on employer branding orientation, the new concept that is based on brand orientation and translates employer branding into the firm-level outcomes (Tumasjan et al., 2020).

Brand orientation is the strategic orientation of the firm that influences its marketing and brand strategy activities and ensures managers to build the powerful brands (Piha, Papadas, & Davvetas, 2021). Brand orientation is a deliberate approach based on brand management as a core competence and brand building leading to organizational development and superior performance (Gromark & Melin, 2013). In brand orientation the brand equity is created through interaction between internal and external stakeholders (Gromark, 2020). In the ecosystem of stakeholders current and potential employees are the core groups among others. The way of applying brand orientation principles for current employees is an internal branding and for potential employees is an employer branding. The current employees should align their behavior with the brand values. Therefore, companies develop internal branding activities to ensure their employees understand the brand values and commit to the brand (Piha & Avlonitis, 2018). Employer branding, in turn, is primarily concerned with the attracting the best talent from the external labor market. In order to attract the qualified professionals, employer branding programs need to ‘catch’ their attention with the unique employer value proposition and communicate it properly based on the target audience segmentation (Theurer et al., 2018). Human resource managers have a central role in developing brand orientation (Balmer & Pondar, 2021) through the employer branding and internal branding programs. Employees, in turn, make a critical contribution to the brand promise because they will further deliver the brand to other stakeholders (Balmer, 2001).

In this study, we aim at investigating how employer branding

orientation impacts recruitment outcomes (recruitment performance and recruitment satisfaction) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the research objectives are: (a) to explore the role of brand orientation and internal branding in building employer branding orientation; (b) to explore the relationships between employer branding orientation and employer branding programs, employer branding programs and recruitment performance, and recruitment performance and recruitment satisfaction; and (c) to clarify the moderating role of COVID-19 effect in explaining the relationships between employer branding orientation and employer branding programs and between employer branding programs and recruitment performance.

Our study contributes to the employer branding literature in several ways. First, we further develop the employer branding orientation concept (Tumasjan et al., 2020) by focusing on employer branding programs, which explain the relationship between employer branding orientation and recruitment outcomes (recruitment performance and recruitment satisfaction). Previously, employer branding programs were seen as an important resource for attracting talent (Minchington, 2014), but no connection with strategic issues was made to them. The research also stated that employer branding programs attempted to increase applicants’ awareness of the organization (Edwards, 2010). In line with this argument, we include three tools – segmentation of target groups, unique employer value proposition, and appropriate communication channels – to specify the nature of employer branding programs. Second, we integrate two broader perspectives from branding (brand orientation and internal branding) to better explain the nature of employer branding orientation. We argue that companies must combine their brand assets together to contribute more to HRM performance, especially to satisfy the recruitment needs more effectively. This practice will enhance employer branding orientation and will probably be relevant in creating and protecting reputational capital (Martin, Gollan, & Grigg, 2011). Third, we explicate the moderating COVID-19 mechanisms underlying the effect of employer branding on recruitment outcomes during the crisis. It extends the previous research in HRM in crisis (Farndale, Horak, Phillips, & Beamond, 2019; Hutchins & Wang, 2008; Zagelmeyer & Gollan, 2012; Zavyalova, Kucherov, & Tsybova, 2018) by focusing the companies’ decisions on investment in employer branding during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Theoretical background and Hypotheses

Employer branding has increased in importance since the middle 1990s after the pilot qualitative research among 27 top executives of UK companies was done by Ambler and Barrow (1996). Ambler and Barrow (1996, p. 187) provide the first academic definition of the employer brand as “the package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company.”.

This definition discusses the relevance of branding for HR needs and the application of marketing principles to the employment situation. Later, this definition became a key one in the research in the field of employer branding (Aggerholm, Andersen, & Thomsen, 2011). Employer branding is a marketing-based approach to efficient recruitment and retention of the qualified professionals under the conditions of highly competitive labor market that consists of the activities to promote inside and outside the company the employers’ unique and desirable attributes (Lievens, 2007). This is a prime approach to respond to recruitment and retention challenges (Martindale, 2010; Wayne & Casper, 2012) which also helps to enhance employee motivation. Employer branding gives a unique and particular employment experience as a branded product (Edwards, 2010) to the ‘internal customer’. The set of tangible and intangible attractive employer brand attributes enhances the sense of organizational belonging, identity, and identification (Lievens, Van Hoye, & Anseel, 2007) among acquired employees, who have an exclusive and outstanding employment experience. As a process, employer branding covers three core aspects: a development of

employer value proposition (what the organization offers to its employees), external marketing of the employer brand (recruitment task), and internal marketing (developing the highly committed employees to retain them) (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Generally, employer branding plays a strategic role in ‘future-proofing’ corporate reputations (Martin et al., 2011), together with the company’s brand orientation and internal branding.

2.1. Brand orientation and internal branding

The concept of brand orientation was firstly introduced by Urde (1994), who found that established brands had great potential for increasing the ability of companies to compete as well as generate growth and profitability. Brand orientation is seen as a particular approach to brands that focuses on brands as resources and strategic hubs (Urde, 1994; Urde, 1997). This is a specific type of marketing orientation, which is described according to the high importance of branding by top management (Baumgarth, 2010). Brand orientation is performed as an approach in which the process of the organization revolves around the creation, development, and protection of brand identity in an ongoing interaction with target customers with the aim of achieving lasting competitive advantages in the form of brands. (Urde, 1999). Brand orientation can be considered an inside-out, identity-driven approach that sees brands as a hub for an organization and its strategy (Urde, Baumgarth, & Merrilees, 2013). In fact, brand orientation refers to the extent to which organizations consider themselves as brands (Hankinson, 2000). Brand orientation is visible through brand-oriented behavior that depends on brand-oriented values, norms and artefacts (Baumgarth, 2010). Thus, brand orientation should lead to build a strong corporate brand that is based on consistency and integrity between customer brands and employer brand (Mosley, 2007). In this sense, companies modify their current employer branding approach to a more specific one, called employer branding orientation (Tumasjan et al., 2020). Thus, we propose that:

Hypothesis 1.1 Brand orientation positively relates to employer branding orientation.

Employer branding is also closely interconnected with the internal branding concept. Internal branding is a subset of internal marketing, with a focus on the internal customer (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2020). It is aimed to promote the brand among the current employees to motivate them to deliver the brand values to external stakeholders (Foster et al., 2010; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016), including jobseekers. Therefore, the main tools used for internal branding are various training programs and a set of internal communications used to entice employees’ loyalty and commitment to organizational goals and values. In other words, these activities facilitate the behavioral changes of employees consistent with desired brand identity (Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006). Through regular transmitting the brand values to all employee groups, the internal customers will aware and support them (Hankinson, 2012). Both employer branding and internal branding strengthen the corporate brand (Hoppe, 2018). To achieve such strength, companies must align their internal branding and employer branding. This thereby enables companies to build a sustainable and holistic corporate brand based on strong corporate culture and organizational identity. Thus, we expect internal branding to contribute positively to brand orientation by building a strong employer branding orientation. Hence, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1.2. Internal branding moderates the relationship between brand orientation and employer branding orientation.

2.2. Employer branding orientation

Employer branding orientation represents a new relevant approach to explain the firm-level outcomes of employer branding in HRM performance. This perspective considers the view that employer brand is becoming highly valuable as a strategic asset in competitive labor

markets. Employer branding is perceived as a key part of the overall HR strategy and therefore penetrates most of HRM practices. The concept was first empirically tested by Tumasjan et al. (2020) to justify the impact of employer branding on recruitment outcomes. They reconceptualized the brand orientation (Wong and Merrilees, 2008) and adopted it to the labor market context focusing on long-term employer branding planning. Employer branding orientation progresses with the previous research on employer branding, which was previously focused mainly on jobseekers’ attitudes and perceptions about particular companies as an employer or ideal employer (Carpentier, Van Hoye, & Weijters, 2019; Kissel & Buttgen, 2015; Kröll, Nüesch, & Foege, 2021; Rampl & Kenning, 2014; Sharma & Prasad, 2018; Trevor & Davis, 2019). Employer branding orientation is defined by Tumasjan et al. (2020, 85) as “an approach in which the HRM processes revolve around the creation, development, and protection of employer brand equity in an ongoing interaction with potential and incumbent employees to achieve sustainable competitive advantages in the labor market.”

In our research, we will use employer branding orientation as a major conceptual base to explain the firm-level outcomes of employer branding in recruitment. Employer branding orientation implies the absolute support from top management and the key role of HR professionals in designing and implementing the employer branding programs. Employer branding programs consist of activities that help the company to attract the best talent from the external labor market. In particular, employer branding programs include the strategic analysis of the labor market, segmentation and identification of target groups, building of the employer brand concept, the development of the employer value proposition (EVP), use of the definite communication channels to promote the EVP, and evaluation of employer branding performance (Theurer et al., 2018). All of these initiatives increase the organization’s perceived attractiveness to talented job seekers (Kröll et al., 2021). In order to complete these diverse tasks successfully, many large companies designate an employer brand manager as a distinct professional within the HRM department (Edlinger, 2015). Thus:

Hypothesis 2. Employer branding orientation positively relates to employer branding programs.

2.3. Employer branding orientation and recruitment outcomes

Recruitment is defined as the process of seeking out and attempting to attract individuals from the external labor market who are capable of and interested in filling job vacancies (Heneman, Schwab, Fossum, & Dyer, 1983). The primary purpose of recruitment is to identify and attract potential employees (Barber, 1998). The important difference between two HR functions that are typically difficult to distinguish, namely recruitment and selection, are the following: selection is the HR function that pares down the number of applicants, recruitment consists of those HR practices that make this paring down possible by building the pool of firm-specific candidates from whom new employees will be selected (Orlitzky, 2007). The recruitment process typically consists of self-selection, objective selection, and subjective selection (Yakubovich & Lup, 2006). It covers the applicant’s decision regarding whether to proceed further or not (self-selection) and the employer’s decision to move a person to the next stage of the process when different test and screening (objective selection), and organizational recruitment finishes with subjective selection (offer-making stage). In order to evaluate the recruitment performance, different measures can be adapted. The most used recruitment measures are the acceptance rate, the quality of hire, efficiency ratio, candidate satisfaction, manager satisfaction, cost per hire, time to fill, retention rate, application completion rate, candidate call back rate, candidates per hire, employee referrals, fill rate, turnover rate, response rate, qualified candidate per opening, recruitment funnel effectiveness, productivity of new employees, selection ratio, and offer acceptance rate (Prasad, Rao, & Vaidya, 2019).

Employer branding involves attracting talent and ensuring that candidates identify with the company and its brand to deliver the

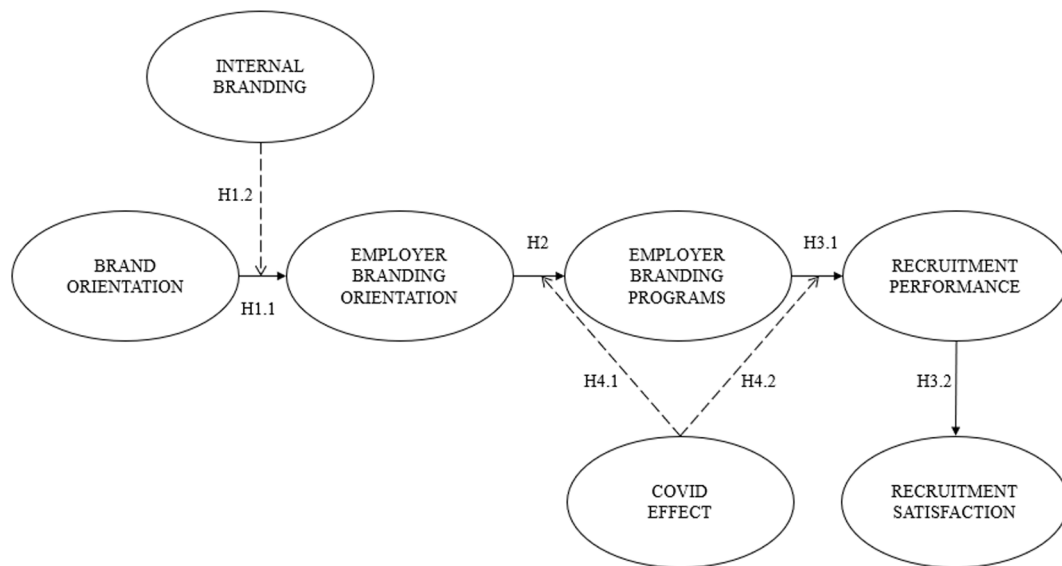


Fig. 1. Overview of Hypothetical Model.

desired results (Martin, 2008). Employer branding also helps the company to differentiate itself from its direct competitors in the best way on labor market (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Moroko & Uncles, 2008). It is expected that companies with an employer branding orientation achieves better performance (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). This primarily relates to recruitment outcomes. The external research confirms that employer branding impacts applicants' behaviors and attitudes toward highly attractive companies, including their intentions and decisions to apply, interview, accept a job offer, and recommend that others apply for or inquire about jobs (Gardner, Erhardt, & Martin-Rios, 2011). This area of employer branding research is the most commonly discussed in recent years (Backhaus, 2016) and is based on such theories as social and organizational identity, psychological contract, and person-organization fit (Theurer et al., 2018). Several studies (e.g., Kröll et al., 2021; Lievens, 2007; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Myrden & Kelloway, 2015; Rampl & Kenning, 2014; Schreurs, Druart, Proost, & DeWitte, 2009; Trevor & Davis, 2019; Van Hoye & Saks, 2011) consider the role of particular employer brand attributes (economic, psychological, and functional; symbolic and instrumental) in explaining the perceived attractiveness of companies and the subsequent intentions of the applicants to contact to the company, participate in selection procedures, and accept a job offer. This potentially brings increasing applicant quantity and quality (Collins & Han, 2004).

Although scholars discuss the impact of employer branding on firm-level recruitment outcomes (Phillips and Gully, 2015), the empirical evidence is scarce. In only one new study, Tumasjan et al. (2020) investigated whether employer branding orientation enhanced recruitment efficiency and was linked to firm performance. In line with this research, we argue that companies with employer branding orientation that successfully implemented their employer branding programs achieve positive recruitment outcomes in terms of their recruitment performance (substantial improvement of recruitment measures within the given time period) and hence the recruitment satisfaction. We thus propose:

Hypothesis 3.1. Employer branding programs positively relate to recruitment performance.

Hypothesis 3.2 Recruitment performance positively relate to recruitment satisfaction.

2.4. Investment in employer branding during crisis

COVID-19 was initially a natural disaster and later brought the world

economy into enormous economic crisis. It has changed the context drastically; during the pandemic, companies have suffered huge losses, and millions of employees have lost their jobs (Cooke, Dickmann, & Parry, 2021). The global labor market experienced the tremendous employment loss of 114 million jobs, thus increasing the inactivity of 81 million people and the decline in global labor income by 8.3% in 2020 (ILO Monitor, 2021). In these tumultuous times, HRM is an efficient tool to manage organizations, but traditional approaches to HRM are not completely adequate to tackle crisis pressures (Ramlal, 2013).

Crisis is an unwanted, unexpected, unprecedented, and almost unmanageable situation that motivates widespread disbelief and uncertainty (Rosenthal, Boin, & Comfort, 2001). There are three types of crises: economic crises, natural disasters, and political instability (Ererd, Nurgabdeshev, Kozhakhmet, Rofcanin, & Demirbag, 2021). Crisis affects the external environment in which HRM operates (Zavyalova et al., 2018) and compels companies to decrease their labor demand (Zagelmeyer & Gollan, 2012), especially when the consumer demand decreases. To become flexible and agile, companies must implement a sustainable approach to HRM that rationally combines the actual economic and social needs of the business. Although there were layoffs in hard-hit sectors (accommodation and food services, arts and culture, retail, construction), the higher-skilled service sectors (information and communication and the financial and insurance activities) demonstrated positive job growth in 2020 (ILO Monitor, 2021). Companies also implemented flexible working practices based on remote work (telework, virtual work) or hybrid models, partly working remotely and partly working on site (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020). Thus, we expect that companies had to modify their employer branding orientation under COVID-19. In particular, they could revise their employer branding programs in order to refuse the excessive employer branding investments. At the same time, this is the period to focus on the quality of their employer branding programs. From that perspective, the contextual effects of the pandemic on employer branding investment decisions should be taken into account. Accordingly, we hypothesize as follows:

Hypothesis 4.1. Shrinking employer branding investments moderate the relationship between employer branding orientation and employer branding programs.

Hypothesis 4.2. Shrinking employer branding investments moderate the relationship between employer branding programs and recruitment performance.

Fig. 1 presents the complete visual representation of the proposed

Table 1
Description of the sample.

Characteristic number		(N = 233)	Percentage
Position of the participant	Employer Brand Manager	7	3.0%
	HR Specialist/Manager	82	35.2%
	Head of HR department	68	29.2%
	Head/manager of marketing department	25	10.7%
	Head of other departments	20	8.6%
	Manager of the department	3	1.3%
	CEO	14	6.0%
	Executive Director	2	0.9%
	Others	12	5.2%
	Industry	FMCG	4
Manufacturing and trading		45	19.3%
IT and Internet		51	21.9%
Telecommunications		3	1.3%
Consulting and services for business		76	32.6%
Retail		4	1.7%
Pharmaceuticals and medicine		7	3.0%
Hospitality		2	0.9%
Transportation and logistics		3	1.3%
Finance and insurance		4	1.7%
Oil and gas		1	0.4%
Energy, mining and processing of raw materials		3	1.3%
Construction and real estate		13	5.6%
Public services		3	1.3%
Wholesaling and distributing		11	4.7%
Others		3	1.3%
Company size		Up to 20 employees	26
	20–50 employees	27	11.6%
	51–100 employees	52	22.3%
	101–250 employees	53	22.7%
	251–500 employees	28	12.0%
	501–1000 employees	19	8.2%
	1001–3000 employees	17	7.3%
	Over 3000 employees	11	4.7%

hypotheses:

In our model, we combine both brand orientation and internal branding and this is the first attempt in this context to empirically check their relationships with employer branding orientation. The previous studies (Foster et al., 2010; Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2020) only conceptually stated on these relationships. Next, we will try to explain the relationship between employer branding orientation and recruitment outcomes (recruitment performance and recruitment satisfaction) through employer branding programs. The current scarce body of relevant research (Tumasjan et al., 2020) found the direct positive relationship between employer branding orientation and recruitment efficiency. At the same time, no intermediate mechanisms that better explain this relationship were found. Finally, we expect to find the contextual effect of COVID-19 that shows the shrinking of employer branding investments. This effect would moderate the relationship between employer branding and recruitment performance in 2020. Overall, our model gives the holistic overview and shows the potential to apply marketing-based concepts (brand orientation and internal branding) through employer branding (employer branding orientation and programs) in order to achieve better recruitment outcomes in crisis times.

3. Methods

3.1. Sample

The present study employed the quantitative methodology and was organized in two stages, including the pilot study and the main data collection. The pilot study was held among 24 experts (HR managers and

employer brand managers) with the aim to verify the scales and the questionnaire design. Based on the feedback from the experts, the order of the questions and the wording of some of them was refined.

The main survey was conducted online in the end of 2020 to ensure the responses reflect the outcomes of the year. The questionnaire included general information about the company, the responding company representative and items addressing the constructs. Initial sample included 1144 companies operating in the Russian market that were chosen based on their expertise in HRM and employer branding. The questionnaire was distributed through a research agency, answers from 239 company were obtained, for a response rate of approximately 20.9%. 6 responses were excluded (due to missing data), and the final sample consisted of 233 companies.

Companies in the resulting sample belong to different industries, including consulting and services for business (32.6%), IT and Internet (21.9%), manufacturing and trading (19.3%), construction and real estate (5.6%), wholesaling and distributing (4.7%), pharmaceuticals and medicine (3%), FMCG (1.7%), retail (1.7%), finance and insurance (1.7%), telecommunications (1.3%), transportation and logistics (1.3%), energy, mining, and processing of raw materials (1.3%), public services (1.3%), hospitality (0.9%), oil and gas (0.4%), and others (1.3%). The sample includes small (22.8%, headcount of <50 employees), medium-sized (57%, headcount from 51 to 500 employees), and large (20.2%, headcount of more than 501 employees) enterprises.

The questionnaire was fulfilled by company representatives, including HRM specialists/managers (35.2%), heads of the HRM department (29.2%), heads/managers of the marketing department (10.7%), heads of other departments (8.6%), CEOs (6.0%), employer brand managers (3.0%), managers of the department (1.3%), executive directors (0.9%), and others (5.2%).

Table 1 displays the overall profile of the companies and the respondents.

3.2. Measurement of variables

Brand Orientation (BO) was measured using a four-item scale adapted from Baumgarth (2010) and Hankinson (2012) on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. For example, “We also invest in our brand in times of scarce financial resources”. The Cronbach’s alpha for this study is 0.786.

Internal Branding (IB) was measured using a five-item scale adapted from Baumgarth (2010) and Hankinson (2012) to assess internal branding. Both initial scales have covered internal branding as part of brand orientation, however, in our study we conceptualize them as interconnected but separate variables, hence the initial scales were divided based on directions of decision-making behind each item (whether it is a more strategic view on the brand image for BO variable or actions and decisions targeted at company employees for IB). Items were to be answered on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. A sample item is, “We ensure that all staff are aware of our brand values, and we support them”. The Cronbach’s alpha for this study is 0.820.

Employer Branding Orientation (EBO) was measured using four items developed by Wong and Merrilees (2007) and adapted by Tumasjan et al. (2020) on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. An example of an item is “Employer branding is essential to our HR strategy”. The Cronbach’s alpha for this study is 0.931.

We measured *Employer Branding Programs (EBP)* using three items adapted from Theurer et al. (2018) and Minchington (2014) on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. For example, “Our Company has an employer value proposition”. The Cronbach’s alpha for this study is 0.731.

To assess *COVID effect (CE)*, three items were developed, and Likert scale measures (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) were used. An example of an item is, “In 2020, employer branding investments

Table 2
Factor Analysis Results.

	BO	IB	EBO	EBP	CE	RP	RS
BO1	0.791	-0.017	-0.186	0.016	-0.161	-0.044	0.070
BO2	0.836	-0.110	-0.025	-0.040	-0.036	0.104	-0.113
BO3	0.742	0.178	0.036	-0.061	0.097	-0.107	0.171
BO4	0.752	-0.036	0.188	0.089	0.113	0.036	-0.116
IB1	0.073	0.763	0.014	-0.013	0.031	0.014	-0.075
IB2	-0.148	0.748	0.132	-0.050	-0.042	-0.121	0.077
IB3	0.210	0.798	-0.282	0.225	-0.042	-0.156	0.194
IB4	0.051	0.818	-0.178	0.025	0.107	0.080	-0.057
IB5	-0.225	0.685	0.382	-0.222	-0.068	0.203	-0.159
EBO1	0.042	-0.103	0.889	-0.042	-0.111	0.082	-0.085
EBO2	-0.079	0.070	0.927	0.066	0.062	0.003	0.031
EBO3	0.117	-0.007	0.905	-0.050	0.008	-0.066	0.063
EBO4	-0.077	0.035	0.919	0.023	0.037	-0.018	-0.012
EBP1	-0.079	0.058	0.023	0.782	0.134	0.054	-0.012
EBP2	0.066	-0.021	-0.172	0.823	-0.179	-0.062	0.015
EBP3	0.009	-0.034	0.151	0.813	0.052	0.011	-0.004
CE1	0.046	-0.050	-0.064	0.080	0.881	0.024	-0.100
CE2	-0.202	0.151	0.174	0.000	0.841	0.152	-0.160
CE3	0.246	-0.157	-0.171	-0.134	0.527	-0.282	0.422
RP1	0.085	-0.030	0.018	0.022	0.006	0.821	0.028
RP2	0.021	-0.025	0.052	-0.066	0.054	0.843	-0.033
RP3	-0.054	0.010	0.048	-0.036	-0.093	0.757	-0.003
RP4	-0.027	-0.012	-0.130	0.027	0.096	0.833	0.014
RP5	-0.022	-0.007	0.017	-0.025	-0.050	0.850	-0.112
RP6	-0.008	0.068	-0.001	0.080	-0.022	0.797	0.113
RS1	0.014	0.085	-0.059	-0.054	-0.099	-0.105	0.755
RS2	0.120	0.112	-0.179	0.213	-0.014	0.079	0.684
RS3	-0.191	0.031	0.171	-0.223	0.015	-0.039	0.662
RS4	0.083	-0.086	0.053	-0.001	-0.170	-0.155	0.702
RS5	-0.119	-0.043	0.136	-0.095	0.059	0.244	0.684
RS6	0.079	-0.098	-0.105	0.150	-0.118	-0.009	0.728

Notes. Bold values represent the factor loading of indicator to the corresponding construct.

Table 3
Overview of Convergence and Discriminant Validity.

Constructs	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's α	AVE	Full collin. VIF	JBT*	RJBT**
BO	0.862	0.786	0.610	2.072	No	No
IB	0.875	0.820	0.583	2.133	No	No
EBO	0.951	0.931	0.829	2.478	No	No
EBP	0.848	0.731	0.650	1.670	No	No
CE	0.803	0.628	0.587	1.065	No	Yes
RP	0.923	0.900	0.668	1.459	Yes	Yes
RS	0.854	0.795	0.494	1.573	No	No

Notes. *Normal Jarque-Bera test; **Normal Robust Jarque-Bera test.

Table 4
The Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratios of Constructs.

Constructs	BO	IB	EBO	EBP	CE	RP	RS
BO							
IB	0.702						
EBO	0.705	0.747					
EBP	0.632	0.670	0.678				
CE	0.157	0.267	0.192	0.276			
RP	0.200	0.168	0.196	0.145	0.175		
RS	0.119	0.099	0.246	0.152	0.182	0.592	

Notes. p < 0.001.

decreased". The Cronbach's alpha for this study is 0.628.

Recruitment Performance (RP) was measured using six items adapted from Tumasjan et al. (2020) and Minchington (2014) on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = substantially worsened to 7 = substantially improved. We asked respondents to assess the dynamics of their organizations' recruitment performance during 2020. For example, "In 2020, the quality of hires...". The Cronbach's alpha for this study is 0.900.

Recruitment Satisfaction (RS) was measured using six items adapted from Tumasjan et al. (2020) and Minchington (2014) on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = completely dissatisfied to 7 = completely satisfied. An example of an item is "Generally we are satisfied by the quality of hires". The Cronbach's alpha for this study is 0.795.

The full description of items is presented in Appendix A.

4. Results

We use partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) for the measurement model estimation and conceptual model assessment. According to Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle, and Mena (2012), PLS-SEM is appropriate for exploratory analysis and provides a better procedure by which to capture maximum explained variance of endogenous constructs, thus leading to a higher prediction. It also offers several advantages: meaningful model results can be achieved with a small sample size, nonlinear relationships undergo a normalization procedure, and it has fewer restrictions on assumptions of distribution (McIntosh et al., 2014; Rönkkö & Evermann, 2013). WarpPLS 7.0 software (Kock, 2020) was used to retrieve the model estimates. In line with the software procedures, all measures for the observed variables were standardized.

4.1. Quality control of the constructs

To check the validity and reliability at the construct and indicator levels, several procedures were run. We ensured content validity with a thorough selection of indicators based on the literature review. In the next step, chosen indicators were confirmed by the experts within the pilot study.

Regarding the indicator level, factor analysis was conducted to test for uni-dimensionality and to assess the construct's reliability. Table 2 shows the output results for the factor loadings. Items measuring the same construct must have a factor loading of > 0.40 (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). The majority of indicators loaded

Table 5
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Scale Variables.

Constructs / Indicators	Mean	SD	BO	IB	EBO	EBP	CR	RP	RS
Brand Orientation (BO)	5.06	1.177	1						
Internal Branding (IB)	5.64	1.068	0.578**	1					
Employer Branding Orientation (EBO)	5.16	1.355	0.606**	0.649**	1				
Employer Branding Programs (EBP)	4.77	1.622	0.490**	0.527**	0.516**	1			
COVID-effect (CE)	4.08	1.453	-0.031	-0.105	-0.089	-0.143*	1		
Recruitment Performance (RP)	4.77	0.972	0.166*	0.133*	0.180**	0.104	-0.124	1	
Recruitment Satisfaction (RS)	5.42	0.860	0.065	0.040	0.213**	0.005	0.022	0.497**	1

Notes. **p < 0.01.; *p < 0.05.

Table 6
Testing results of the path coefficients.

Paths	Coefficients	p-values	SE	t-values	95% CI		f ²
					LCI	UCI	
BO → EBO (R ² = 0.39; Q ² = 0.38)	0.517	<0.001	0.060	8.645	0.399	0.634	0.317
EBO → EBP (R ² = 0.35; Q ² = 0.35)	0.510	<0.001	0.060	8.524	0.393	0.627	0.292
EBP → RP (R ² = 0.07; Q ² = 0.08)	0.148	0.010	0.064	2.325	0.023	0.273	0.028
RP → RS (R ² = 0.34; Q ² = 0.34)	0.583	<0.001	0.059	9.874	0.467	0.699	0.340
Moderation 1:IB → (BO → EBO)	-0.132	0.020	0.064	-2.063	-0.257	-0.007	0.059
Moderation 2:CE → (EBO → EBP)	0.166	0.005	0.064	2.613	0.042	0.291	0.068
Moderation 3:CE → (EBP → RP)	0.201	<0.001	0.063	3.177	0.077	0.325	0.047

Notes. SE – Standard errors for path coefficients; CI – confidence interval; LCI – lower limit of confident interval; UCI – upper limit of confidence interval; f² – effect sizes for total effects.

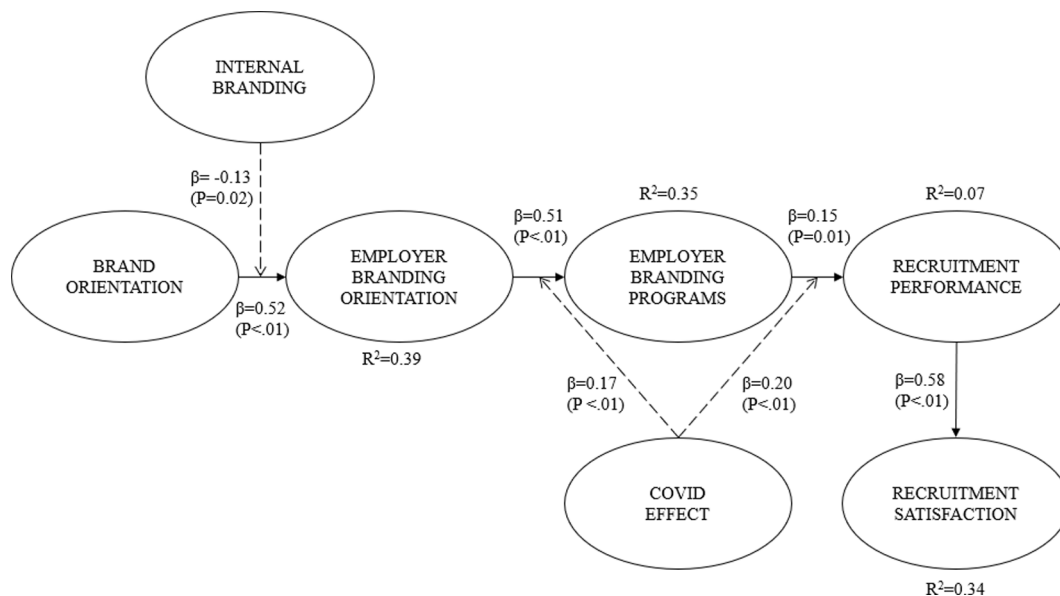


Fig. 2. Overview of Results of PLS-SEM.

significantly greater than 0.7 to their construct, and all measures were at least 0.1 less on their loadings on other constructs.

Concerning the construct level, composite reliability and Cronbach’s alphas were used (Table 3). Composite reliability measures are higher than 0.8, which indicates robust construct reliability (Hulland, 1999; Hofeditz, Nienaber, Dysvik, & Schewe, 2017). All constructs demonstrated a reasonable degree of internal consistency, as the Cronbach’s alpha values were ≥ 0.73 (acceptable if > 0.7 ; Hulland, 1999). The only exception is the COVID effect ($\alpha = 0.628$), which is moderately good. It

was concluded that the measurement items could be used to measure the constructs with acceptable reliability. In addition, the average variance extracted (AVE) of each construct was higher than the recommended value of 0.50 (Hair et al., 2012; Hofeditz et al., 2017). The variance inflation factor (VIF) meets the criterion, and the highest number is 2.478 (acceptable if < 5 ; Zuur, Ieno, & Elphick, 2010).

Finally, cross-loadings and the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) were used to assess discriminant validity (Rönkkö & Cho, 2020). According to Table 2, all items are loaded to their reflective constructs, with

Table A1
Constructs, indicators, and descriptive statistics.

Constructs / Indicators	Scale	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Brand Orientation (BO)	a	5.06	1.177	1.75	7
We also invest in our brand in times of scarce financial resources	a	4.80	1.525	1	7
Today, building of a strong brand is the priority in development of our organization.	a	5.07	1.395	1	7
We ensure that the meaning of the brand is represented consistently in all internal and external marketing communication activities.	a	5.56	1.206	1	7
We invest in image advertising		4.79	1.894	1	7
Internal Branding (IB)	a	5.64	1.068	2.40	7
There is good communication between marketing and other departments as regards branding	a	5.25	1.729	1	7
We ensure that all staff are aware of our brand values, and support them	a	5.90	1.100	2	7
We teach our employees about the brand	a	5.46	1.488	1	7
Brand managers have the competence and authority to succeed with the positioning of our brand internally	a	5.56	1.455	1	7
Our employees follow the principles of corporate culture, the rules of communication	a	6.04	1.183	1	7
Employer Branding Orientation (EBO)	a	5.16	1.355	1	7
Employer branding is essential to our HR strategy	a	5.06	1.516	1	7
Employer branding is essential in running this company	a	5.38	1.452	1	7
Long-term employer brand planning is critical to our future success	a	5.12	1.510	1	7
Employer branding flows through all of our HR activities	a	5.06	1.479	1	7
Employer Branding Programs (EBP)	a	4.77	1.622	1	7
We segment the labor market to identify the target audience of our candidates	a	4.89	1.818	1	7
Our company has an employer value proposition (EVP)	a	5.05	2.155	1	7
Our company has employer branding communication programs	a	4.37	2.053	1	7
COVID Effect (CE)	a	4.08	1.453	1	7
COVID-19 negatively impacted our employer branding programs	a	3.45	2.034	1	7
Our investments in employer branding programs declined in 2020	a	3.96	2.003	1	7
(rev) COVID-19 helped to develop our employer branding programs	a	3.17	1.651	1	7
Recruitment Performance (RP)	b	4.77	0.972	1.67	7
To what extent the dynamics of the following recruitment performance measures in your Company changed over 2020:					
the quality of hires	b	4.91	1.173	2	7
time to fill	b	4.77	1.213	1	7
turnover rate	b	4.65	1.308	1	7
cost per hire	b	4.64	1.181	1	7
offer acceptance rate	b	4.72	1.068	2	7
productivity of new employees	b	4.93	1.205	1	7
Recruitment Satisfaction (RS)	c	5.42	0.860	1.83	7
We are generally satisfied with:					
the quality of hires	c	5.53	1.214	1	7
time to fill	c	5.25	1.303	1	7
turnover rate	c	5.49	1.412	1	7
cost per hire	c	5.30	1.311	2	7
offer acceptance rate	c	5.35	1.096	2	7
the productivity of new employees	c	5.60	1.013	1	7

Notes. a – from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree; b – from 1 = substantially worsened to 7 = substantially improved; c – from 1 = completely dissatisfied to 7 = completely satisfied.

Table B1
Model fit and quality indices.

Goodness of fit measures	Estimated Model	Acceptable fit criteria
Average path coefficient (APC)	0.322 (P < 0.001)	
Average R-squared (ARS)	0.288 (P < 0.001)	
Average adjusted R-squared (AARS)	0.282 (P < 0.001)	
Average block VIF (AVIF)	1.479	acceptable <= 5 ideally <= 3.3
Average full collinearity VIF (AFVIF)	1.789	acceptable <= 5 ideally <= 3.3
Tenenhaus GoF (GoF)	0.462	small >= 0.1 medium >= 0.25 large >= 0.36
Sympson’s paradox ratio (SPR)	1.000	acceptable >= 0.7 ideally = 1
R-squared contribution ratio (RSCR)	1.000	acceptable >= 0.9 ideally = 1
Statistical suppression ratio (SSR)	1.000	acceptable >= 0.7
Nonlinear bivariate causality direction ratio (NLBCDR)	0.929	acceptable >= 0.7

Notes. See Henseler, Hubona and Ray (2016) for more information on the acceptable fit criteria.

indicators higher than all other constructs. All HTMT values presented in Table 4 fit the conservative threshold of 0.85 (Teo, Srivastava, & Jiang, 2008). Therefore, we were satisfied with the discriminant validity of the measures used.

Moreover, two tests of normality were performed: the results of the classic Jarque-Bera test (Bera & Jarque, 1981; Jarque & Bera, 1980) and Gel and Gastwirth’s (2008) robust modification of the test (Kock, 2020). The results presented in Table 3 show that our latent variables were found to be nonnormally distributed (with the only one exception – CE) that justify the choice of PLS-SEM procedure.

4.2. Descriptive statistics

Table 5 presents the means and standard deviations for each scale and the interscale correlations. Correlation analysis demonstrates the expected direction of association. The descriptive statistics for indicators are presented in Appendix A.

4.3. Test of hypotheses

As shown in Table 6, the adjusted R² coefficients for all latent variable blocks in the model are above 2% (meet general recommendations by Cohen (1988)). The Stone-Geisser criterion (Geisser, 1974; Stone, 1974) also shows a positive value for Brand Orientation influence on Employer brand orientation (Q² = 0.38), Employer brand orientation’s impact on Employer brand program (Q² = 0.35), Employer brand program’s influence on Recruitment performance (Q² = 0.08), and Recruitment performance on Recruitment satisfaction (Q² = 0.34). These results confirm the acceptable predictive validity of the analytical model (Chin, 1998; Kock, 2015a, 2015b). Table 6 provides details on the path coefficients, their corresponding p-values, standard errors, and effect sizes. The presumed relationships between latent variables can be confirmed and have significant path coefficients. Almost all relationships were significant and showed strong path coefficients greater than p = 0.2, except for the path coefficient between Employer Branding Programs and Recruitment Performance. Moreover, the path coefficients for the moderating effect of COVID is below 0.2.

The results of testing the PLS-SEM model are demonstrated on the Fig. 2. The extended model fit and quality indices are presented in Appendix B.

Hypothesis 1.1 states that Brand orientation positively relates to

Employer branding orientation. In support of Hypothesis 1.1, we found a positive relationship between BO and EBO ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.01$; $f^2 = 0.317$). The effect size for it is strong, thus Hypothesis 1.1 is supported.

Hypothesis 1.2 posits that Internal Branding moderates the relationship between BO and EBO. The hypothesis shows moderate confirmation ($\beta = -0.13$, $p = 0.02$; $f^2 = 0.059$). However, the moderating effect is negative; the internal branding makes the relationship between BO and EBO weaker.

Hypothesis 2 proposes that Employer branding orientation positively relates to Employer branding programs ($\beta = 0.51$; $p < 0.01$; $f^2 = 0.292$). We observe a positive relationship and strong effect size, therefore Hypothesis 2 is supported by the model results.

In line with Hypothesis 3.1, Employer branding programs positively relate to Recruitment performance ($\beta = 0.15$, $p = 0.01$; $f^2 = 0.028$). The effect size for it can be considered to be weak. Thus, the hypothesis has weak confirmation; however, we still consider this relationship to omit the path from the model showed decrease in the model quality. Thus, we consider Hypothesis 3.1. supported.

Hypothesis 3.2 predicts that Recruitment performance positively relate to Recruitment satisfaction ($\beta = 0.58$, $p < 0.01$; $f^2 = 0.340$). The effect size is strong, and the hypothesis is supported.

Hypotheses 4.1 and 4.2 state that the COVID effect moderates both relationships between Employer branding orientation and Employer branding programs ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$; $f^2 = 0.068$) and between Employer branding programs and Recruitment performance ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < 0.01$; $f^2 = 0.047$). The effect size for both paths is moderate. Hypotheses 4.1 and 4.2 are supported.

5. Discussion

Our research integrated the concepts of brand orientation and internal branding with employer branding to provide a moderated model of their effect on recruitment outcomes (recruitment performance and recruitment satisfaction). We used the employer branding orientation as a key conceptual framework (Tumasjan et al., 2020) to explain the impact of employer branding on firm-level recruitment outcomes (Phillips and Gully, 2015). Our findings demonstrate a positive relationship between brand orientation and employer branding orientation. This provides consistency between the overall approach of companies to promote the idea of “living a brand” or brand-oriented behaviors (Urde et al., 2013) and the application of this idea in the context of employment relationships.

At the same time, we found a negative moderating effect of internal branding on the relationship between brand orientation and employer branding orientation. Presumably the companies from the sample currently do not prioritize internal branding as a tool for recruitment. Rather, internal branding could be mostly used to train and retain employees. This result contradicts the idea that companies must use a more integrated approach to align the external recruitment initiatives with the internal branding practices (Mosley, 2007). Another possible explanation is that the observed effect signals about the difference in accents that companies make when building employer brands. The stronger is internal branding, the lower is the direct effect of brand orientation activities themselves on employer branding orientation, and that might mean that employer branding is more focused on retention not on recruitment.

We also confirmed the positive and direct relationship between employer branding orientation and employer branding programs. These programs are based on the precise segmentation of target groups, unique employer value proposition, and appropriate communication channels to promote the employer brand (Theurer et al., 2018). Although we found a positive relationship between employer branding programs and recruitment performance, the effect size was rather weak. We guess that this can be partially explained by the fact that we collected the data during the COVID-19 pandemic, and many companies revised their employer branding programs. This argument is confirmed using the

moderated effect of COVID-19 on the relationship between employer branding programs and recruitment performance. We identified that half of the companies from the sample aimed to reduce their employer branding investments during the tumultuous COVID-19 pandemic, not to reject them completely, but rather to focus on targeted recruitment tasks. Finally, we found a positive and direct relationship between recruitment performance and recruitment satisfaction. The overall results are largely in accordance with the existing research reported by Tumasjan et al. (2020) and the idea of impact of employer branding on firm-level recruitment outcomes (Phillips and Gully, 2015).

5.1. Theoretical implications

This study constitutes a first attempt to integrate the marketing-based concepts of brand orientation (Urde, 1994; Urde, 1997; Baumgarth, 2010; Gromark, 2010; Urde, Baumgarth, & Merrilees, 2013; Gromark & Melin, 2013; Balmer & Pondar, 2021) and internal branding (Foster et al., 2010; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016; Hoppe, 2018; Piha & Avlonitis, 2018; Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2020) with the new concept of employer branding orientation (Tumasjan et al., 2020; Kucherov, Alkanova, Lisovskaia, & Tsybova, 2022) to reveal an impact on recruitment outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic; thus, it contributes to employer branding research in several ways.

First, we investigated the role of brand orientation as a key concept that explains the organizational brand-oriented behavior and culture that is also applicable in the context of the labor market. It requires the shared brand vision of employees and the putting of brand key values into daily practice (Huang & Tsai, 2013). More specifically, this is the first empirical confirmation of the importance of synergy between brand orientation and employer branding orientation. The findings show that companies prioritize in building the strong brand even in crisis times and consistently promote it using different internal and external tools. Such strategic orientation also guarantees employer attractiveness (Balmer & Pondar, 2021). We also argue about the potential contribution of internal branding in building strong employer branding orientation. Internal branding is seen as a tool for building brand supportive behaviours of employees (Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006; Foster et al., 2010; Piha & Avlonitis, 2018). However, the effects of internal branding on employer branding are still underestimated.

Second, we uncovered the crucial role of employer branding programs as the activities that helped the company to attract the best talent from the external labor market. Employer branding programs are used to enhance the employer brand awareness and attractiveness (Theurer et al., 2018). We argue that employer branding programs reveal the employer branding orientation of a company in terms of how it segments the target labor market, how the EVP is developed, and what communication channels are used to promote the EVP. In line with Tumasjan et al. (2020), we assert that employer branding orientation is a relevant approach in explaining the impact of employer branding on firm-level recruitment outcomes. Thus, we revealed that employer branding orientation affects firm-level recruitment outcomes and is associated with robust employer branding programs.

Finally, we extend the discussion about HRM in crisis in terms of the employer branding programs used. We provided evidence on the moderating COVID-19 effects that explained the relationship between employer branding orientation and employer branding programs, employer branding programs and recruitment outcomes during times of crisis. In fact, these effects represent the decisions to invest in employer branding programs under COVID-19. The current scarce relevant studies revealed that during COVID-19 that companies tended to use the targeted employer branding strategy because of the reduced budgets and resources (Nelke, 2021). Although indeed many companies decreased their investments in employer branding programs during COVID-19, such industries as knowledge-intensive did not give the programs up at all (Kucherov et al., 2022).

5.2. Practical implications

This study found that employer branding orientation can enhance recruitment outcomes. To become attractive employers, companies must follow a more integrated approach by combining its brand orientation with employer branding orientation and further applying it through employer branding programs. Although we did not find the positive effect of internal branding, we still believe in the potential benefits of using the internal branding in recruitment. Internal branding not only builds the brand-oriented behavior of employees (performing their role in relation to the brand promise, influence on attitudes of employees towards the brand) (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007) but also transforms their behavior to become employer brand ambassadors. Unfortunately, companies probably currently use internal branding for employee retention. To better integrate the employer branding into the corporate brand orientation, companies should recruit the employer brand managers. These professionals will make the company not only more visible and attractive for talented applicants (Edlinger, 2015), but will also interlock employer branding in the corporate brand building. In crisis times, companies have also to pay special attention to the nature of the employer branding orientation. In case of limited budgets, lack of support from top-management and decision to dismiss the employees or use more flexible working practices, employer branding orientation could be revised. In such situation it will be aimed not for the recruitment needs but rather to raise the awareness and maintain the high level of attractiveness among potential jobseekers for the future projects.

The robust employer branding programs imply a sequential set of activities done by the HRM team or employer brand managers. First, companies must define their goals for employer branding (recruitment and/or retention). Next, segmentation should be done to identify the target groups for the employer brand, and a survey among the target groups is conducted to collect data about the perception and attitudes toward the company's employer brand. The segmentation bases could include the set of relevant factors for the employer (e.g., age, degree, university, grade point average, location and income level, career focus, perceived life stage and desired career benefits (Moroko & Uncles, 2009). Then the EVP is developed to represent the employer's main competitive advantages and benefits and is promoted through digital (social media, corporate website, blogs, video platforms, gamification) and offline (job and career fairs, company brochures, company events, sponsorship, induction, and training programs) communications. EVP should cover the unique and differentiating messages that are valuable for the chosen target group. In addition, companies need to select the appropriate communication tools that are also used by that target group (e.g., for young talent from universities both career fairs and social media would be relevant, but companies need to specify when, how and what particular career fairs and social media will be utilized). Companies must also implement HR analytics in recruitment (recruitment analytics) and specify a set of appropriate measures to monitor the recruitment performance and its changes under the employer branding impact. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the digital online employer branding tools have high potential for use.

5.3. Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study provides important insights about the impact of employer branding orientation on recruitment outcomes in times of COVID-19 crisis. However, a few limitations of the study should be noted. First, the results should be viewed with appropriate caution because the nature of the data is cross-sectional which is a common approach in employer branding research. At the same time, a longitudinal study would help to identify how companies revise their employer branding orientation and programs from a long-term perspective and how these impact recruitment outcomes. Second, this study was conducted in the context of the Russian labor market, and hence generalizability of the findings for other contexts may be limited in the areas affected by

cultural and legislative differences. We suggest that future studies examine the generalizability of the results in the new cultural settings and countries. Third, in order to achieve the research goal, we provided a new measure called "the COVID effect" with a Cronbach's alpha of slightly <0.7 for this study. Thus, we plan to make further thorough analysis of this measure, discuss it with experts, and apply it in our next studies by extended the set of items applied within it.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Dmitry G. Kucherov: Conceptualization, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Victoria S. Tsybova:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Software, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Antonina Yu. Lisovskaia:** Writing – original draft. **Olga N. Alkanova:** Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A

See Table A1.

Appendix B

See Table B1.

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